

# Seiðr Magic

by Ed Richardson

Of all the reconstructed systems of archaic magickal practice, *Seiðr* seems to be one of the most misunderstood. This is partly because of its sinister reputation, and partly because of sexist notions that only women ever practised divination. All too often *Seiðr* is mistaken for the craft of the Volva, where in reality (if such a notion is useful) the Volvas were only part of a far wider practice. In order to make sense of the collection of beliefs and practices which make up *Seiðr*, some definitions shall be considered, followed by a look at some of the practices involved and their implications. This whole essay shall illustrate examples found in the myths of Northern Europe.

*Seiðr* literally means 'seething' or 'boiling' and has much in common with shamanism and other forms of primitive magick. Indeed it is highly likely that *Seiðr* is an adaptation of shamanic practices to suit the culture and times, when primitive society evolved discovering religion, agriculture and metallurgy. However, *Seiðr* is not a religious practice; it is a magickal practice which is where some of its sinister reputation originates. Jan Fries explains that the *Seiðr* magickians would sell their craft, which makes them something akin to occult mercenaries. Its use is always pragmatic and is reflected as such in the myths. The myths play a vital role in understanding Northern magick as they show how the Aesir, Vanir, Giants and Humanity used magick to deal with problems, hinting at techniques that may be useful today.

So, what was the magick of the *Seiðr* magickian? Much has been said on the Volva, that conducted seances, often to the exclusion of other *Seiðr* magickians. This has provided much of the distortion about what *Seiðr* is and is somewhat like saying 'magick is witchcraft' even though it may (or may not in some Wiccan circles) be true that 'witchcraft is magick'. Nigel Pennick and Jan Fries list a number of types of *Seiðr* magick including the following:

- **Dulr** (Anglo Saxon 'Thyle') the shamanically inspired poet, orator and sage, which may have similarities with the Celtic bard;
- **Warlock** the Scottish, Teutonic magickian who practices binding magick to either ward off or bind spirits to a given task;
- **Volva** who carries out public seances to give divined advice on such issues as weather and harvest;
- **berserker** who wears a bear skin shirt into battle, shape shifting into a bear for superhuman strength, and imperviousness to injury whilst fighting - they fought in units;
- **Ulfhednar** who wore wolf skins and practised shape shifting for individual and guerilla warfare;
- **Svinfylking** warriors who shape shifted into boars as elite troops, known for their

- powers of disguise, escapology and super-human strength;
- **Hagzissa** or 'hedge sitter' who bridged the world of village life with the world of ghosts, demons and Gods;
  - **Seiðrkona/Seiðrmaðr** the magickian in general (female and male respectively) who used the *Seiðr* trance.

No doubt others could be added to the list. The magick of *Seiðr* as described by Edred Thorsson and Freya Aswynn, includes divination, soul travel, shape shifting, necromancy and cursing. I should like to add sigil magick (as a modern adaptation) and healing, and shall explain why later. First, the other magics shall be given due attention.

In *Eink's Saga*, divination is carried out by the Spakona (clairvoyant prophetess) using elaborate costumery and props. Music was used to help achieve trance during which soul travel is carried out to find answers for the divination. The Volva used these methods too although the Spakona sometimes also consulted runes while seething. Mircea Eliade suggests that Volvas principally carried out divination to find out about weather and fertility issues. However, Eliade also says that Odin used *Seiðr* to foresee important events, and his concerns were more with battle. It seems likely, therefore, that *Seiðr* practised by other than Volvas may have been used in warfare.

Soul travel is related to divination so shall now be considered in more detail. Shamanic traditions work on the basis of different levels of reality: the consensual, everyday reality and the other world/s. The World Tree appears in most shamanic cultures and acts as the axis-mundi, or centre of the universe, connecting the different worlds and realities. In the Northern Tradition, the horse has related symbolic meaning, representing a means of transport to the other world (the shaman being the rider). Similarly the world tree is called 'Yggdrasil', or Odin's steed. More shall be said on the horse and *Seiðr* later. Returning to *Seiðr* itself, when in an altered state, or 'seething', the magickian can travel up, down or along Yggdrasil to access the other worlds. As mentioned before soul travel was used by the Volva/Spakona as a form of divinatory astral projection. *Seiðr* soul travel also appears in myth, when Hermod rides to Helheim to petition the Goddess Hella to release Baldur, whose untimely death was caused by Loki. Thorsson suggests that this is one of the main forms of *Seiðr*. Some soul travel may include shape shifting.

Thorsson and Eliade associate *Seiðr* with shape shifting. Perhaps its most famous use is by the berserkers and other warrior-magickians to gain superhuman powers in combat. Such abilities were based around strength, pain resistance and evasion. These greatly feared warriors were seen as an elite. Shape shifting has also been associated with malevolent magick with some Volvas (according to Freya Aswynn) sending out 'nightmares'. Certainly shape shifting features in the myths and is hinted at in descriptions of *Seiðr* magickians' associations with animals. Kaledon Naddair suggests that the Church associated shamanism with evil animals. He and others hint at the connections between horses and shamanism. Nigel Pennick describes how a rapport with animals would be developed which is similar to the shaman's rapport with totems.

Certain Gods and Goddesses have animal totems although it is unlikely that any one animal is absolutely fixed to a Deity. However, Freya is associated with cats, Odin with wolves and

ravens, etc. The myths show the Aesir and Vanir shape shifting and are the richest source on the subject for modern magickians. Odin uses disguise and shape shifts to serpent and eagle forms to recover the mead of inspiration after it has been stolen by the Giants. The Giant Thiazzi shape shifts into an eagle in the theft of the apples of immortality from the Goddess Idun and then Loki borrows Freya's 'falcon skin' to get them back. Loki also changes into a flea, stinging insects, a horse and a salmon at various points in the stories. The Gods also run into trouble when accidentally killing the mortal, human Freidmar's son who was in the form of an otter at the time.

Shape shifting, when done in pathworkings is merely an interesting form of visualisation. However, by using seething techniques (as detailed later) it can potentially become a full blown possession. Possession here is a form of letting go, and allowing another personality or entity to work through. Jan Fries wrote about this in his excellent book *Helrunar* and it can be compared with Voudoun/Santeria techniques. Shape shifting may be used with animal or other spirits such as Gods, Demons, Giants and Totems but the closer allies are the most recommended. Soul travel to establish a rapport with the entities is sensible before trying out possession. Once established, personal totems make amongst the most valuable spirits to invoke as they have your interest in mind and you are more likely to make sense of the experience later.

Necromancy has its place in *Seiðr* as the realm of the dead, Helheim may be visited in soul travel in the same way as realms of the living. Volvas often carried out the *Seiðr* seance and the Hagzissa dealt with ghosts. Warlocks kept unwanted spirits of the dead away. Perhaps possession could be carried out working with ghosts and I would welcome any feedback on this. Myth has its examples of necromancy. Odin raised the ghost of a Volva to find out why Baldur was troubled in his sleep and his death was foretold. Also, Hermod journeyed to Helheim as mentioned earlier. Odin and Freya both have a psychopomp role and share the souls of the brave, amassing armies to fight the forces of darkness at Ragnorok.

Cursing has been described as a *Seiðr* practice by Jan Fries and Freya Aswynn. However there is little evidence of this in myth or sagas in terms of any word weaving or charms during *Seiðr* practice. Certainly malevolent magick is described, but for the *Seiðr* magickian this is more associated with shape shifting, or casting out the fetch. However the modern magickian could easily adapt curses to *Seiðr* making the curse when the appropriate altered state has been reached. This is true also of sigil magick and spell casting in general. The magickian would prepare his sigil/rune/spell in the usual way and focus on it during *Seiðr* obsession, allowing the trance to carry the magick deep into the void.

Healing has been disputed as a genuine *Seiðr* practice, but mainly by those who only understand *Seiðr* in terms of the Volva. In the definitions of *Seiðr* we encounter the concept of boiling and concocting in the *Seiðr* cauldron. Whilst no doubt trance-inducing sacraments are produced in this way, it seems likely that remedies are implied too. From personal experience, the *Seiðr* trance can be used to identify malevolent spirits causing disease in patients. Once identified the illness demon can be drawn into a spirit trap such as a crystal, labyrinth or chaosphere. This is illustrated very well in the novel *The Way of Wyrð* by Brian Bates. Jan Fries also suggests that healing can be associated with *Seiðr*.

The key to *Seiðr* is the altered state. Seething may be a term used to describe the state of the practitioner during a working, as trembling often occurs. Jan Fries quite correctly points out that the body's shaking may or may not be within the magician's control and refers to 'pseudo epilepsy'. To this I should like to add that no amount of trembling your body is enough, it is ultimately the mind which must boil. From my own experience, fits of shaking sometimes occur from orgasm or otherwise from prolonged exposure to alternative extremes of heat and cold after fasting. Shamanic practices, to which *Seiðr* is similar, have often been associated with epilepsy. However, most chaoists will be familiar with a variety of different gnoses, particularly those achieved through (as described by a certain regular writer for Chaos International) "sex and drugs and rock 'n' roll".

Orgasm is useful in *Seiðr* magic and sexuality has often been associated with it in history. The Church accused shamanism and *Seiðr* of indulging in sexual deviance (so what are we waiting for?!) and spoke of *ergi* which means filth. Sexual fluids and menstrual blood can be used in binding magic, linking objects with the sorcerer. Sex induced trances (which are generally best achieved in a slow, relaxed way) are excellent for scrying and soul travel. Myth generally describes the Vanir teaching *Seiðr* to the Aesir (although some accounts say that Odin invented it). The people of the Vanir are described by history and archaeology as being pacifist (i.e., crap at fighting) and using primitive weapons if they had to fight (as I said...). Hence they were defeated by the Aesir people who migrated into their area and absorbed much of their culture. So, what has this got to do with sex? The Vaniric people had a set of Gods and Goddesses who represented nature and fertility and whose worship involved ecstatic and sexual rites. This sexual emphasis was personified to the people by the Goddess Freya. She it was who taught *Seiðr* to Odin. Freya is described in myth as using her sexuality in magical contexts, just as she can also shape shift. Freya used her sexuality to obtain the Necklace of the Brisings which could be interpreted as her gaining magickal inspiration through sexual ritual.

Now. about drugs... Odin is rather partial to mead so may be invoked when blind drunk. However this doesn't make recollection of the event any easier! The berserkers, or 'bear shirts' would make use of the fly agaric mushroom to achieve altered states before shape shifting. Alby Stone even suggests that the world tree, Yggdrasil, is a fly agaric mushroom. However, Yggdrasil is definitely described as a tree and although the white bark of the tree is like an agaric stem, so also is the bark of a silver birch tree and fly agaric is normally found on the ground near these trees. Although there is little account of its being used in rituals in Northern Europe, it seems reasonable to suggest that psilocybin mushrooms such as the liberty cap and the false chanterelle would be useful. *Seiðr* magic as boiling could equally be brewing ales or toadstool soup.

Music and dance are useful for achieving altered states. Shamanistic animal dancing, as described by Gordon MacLellan and Michael Harner may be used to assist possession by animal spirits. Dancing to achieve exhaustion may also be employed. Music is described in *Egil's Saga* as an aid to the Volvas to achieve an altered state, chanting being used. Glossolalia or *galdr* (chanting runes) may be especially useful here along with 'power songs', singing the practitioner into gnosis. According to Mircea Eliade, drumming has long been associated with shamanic practice but should not be confused with the random cacophony of beats to the

pseudo-evangelical "we all come from the Goddess" chant that lasts for bursts of up to ten minutes at some Pagan campfires. Persistent, rhythmic beats are needed and the longer the drumming, the more the mind seethes. I have found that working with about two or three people in a totally darkened chamber using a rattle and a couple of drums can produce the most fascinating visions after only twenty to thirty minutes. Perhaps the ultimate experience is the rave, where MDMA and loud music (remember that taking drugs is illegal and naughty, kids!), combined with frenzied dancing can make for a perfect opportunity for practical sorcery. Ozric Tentacles live certainly work!

No doubt the intelligent magician will find a whole range of other techniques to get the altered state, but without it *Seiðr* magic is not possible.

Before looking at the horse in relation to *Seiðr* an account of Odin's magic shall be given as a final example of seething. The following passage is an excerpt from the Havamal and demonstrates Odin's use of pain, starvation and thirst to achieve an altered state whereby he discovers the runes:

"I know how I hung  
From the windswept tree  
For nine long nights  
Pierced by the spear  
Given to Odin  
Myself to myself  
From the branch of the tree  
Of which nobody knows  
From which root it has grown  
They offered me neither Bread nor drink  
Then I bent over  
Took up the runes  
Took them up screaming  
And fell to the ground..."

The horse frequently figures as a symbol related to the practice of *Seiðr*. horse cults have often had strong sexual overtones. Kaledon Naddair writes of hobby horse use in fertility rituals, the horse here being a big cock. H.R. Ellis Davidson writes of Church reports claiming that volvas had sexual liaisons with horses. This probably indicates a Vaniric interest in horse worship and

the horse was also venerated by later people of the Aesir. It is for this reason that in Germanic/Scandinavian countries the eating of horse meat is still taboo.

Odin's horse, Sleipnir, is interesting in the context of *Seiðr*. It is a magical beast with eight legs and the ability to fly through the air. Could Sleipnir be a mythological representation of Yggdrasil (which means 'Odin's steed'), the world tree and shamanistic practices to visit the other worlds?

This also connects with the valknut. Much has been said about this symbol, but some of the real secrets are still to be understood. The valknut is not simply a symbol of Odin, but is more associated with the processes he undertakes. Effectively it can symbolise the *Seiðr* magician. Its knot of nine angles made by three interlocking triangles has been called the knot of the slain. As a symbol of the dead it is also a symbol of the altered state (these two concepts are intimately linked throughout the world). The slain are also those who accept their lot and are thus liberated to act their will. Odin achieved this through an initiatory working which climaxed in his ordeal on the tree. The three triangles can be said to represent the three Nornir: Urda, Werdandi and Skuld, the goddesses determining past, present and...wait for it...that which is necessitated by the present (European Heathens did not have any concept of future beyond this). The three Nornir map out Wyrð and the magician knows his place (or limits/background) and works freely in accordance with it, possibly transcending it to some degree. The magician as well as master of time is also a master of space. The nine points represent the nine worlds which the *Seiðr* sorcerer is at liberty to visit. Thus the valknut symbolises the process of transcendental *Seiðr* magic in its most pragmatic sense. Odin rides through the universe on his magical horse taking part in this process, hence his association with this symbol.

Returning to Odin and horses, it seems that the big O has some horsey names. These include Jalkr, which means 'gelding' (this name has led to speculation that Odin was a eunuch or practised unmanly pursuits [whatever that means even though there are no accounts of Odin that support this]), and *Volsi* or 'horse's pizzle' (which can also be translated as 'Holy Man').

Having looked at these aspects of *Seiðr* we should now consider why it has had rough treatment by rune using occultists. Largely sexism and Christianity are at fault and occultists have believed everything they have read or heard. Some *Seiðr* practices, such as those of the volva were described as unmanly. This is probably because in a warrior society it would be unwise for the sorcerer to let himself become vulnerable by going into trance. However, the bulk of *Seiðr* practitioners were not volvas. The general name for the female practitioner was the *Seiðrkonar*; and for the male, the *Seiðrmdr*. The berserkers whilst seething were boiling with rage and were exclusively male. Men practising *Seiðr* were described as carrying *ergi* or 'filth', but these descriptions were given by a patriarchal church that believed that women had no soul and were beyond saving, and that men needed to be warned of the dangers of carnal pleasures and sorcery. Sexual perversion has been used as an accusation throughout history whenever one group has dominated and persecuted another. Whether *Seiðr* magicians took it up the arse or not, the real 'sinister' 'perverted' behaviour that threatened the christian world was that *Seiðr* magicians were seething with and for ecstasy.

## READING

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Neville Drury - Elements of Shamanism [Element]

Kevin Crossley-Holland - The Norse Myths

Mireca Eliade - Shamanism

Jan Fries - Visual Magick and Helrunar [Mandrake]

Nicholas Hall - Chaos and Sorcery

Michael Harner - Way of the Shaman

Gordon McLellan - Practical Totems as found in Talking Stick No.11

Nigel Pennick - Practical Magic in the Northern Tradition

Alby Stone - A Root of Yggdrasil as found in Talking Stick No.12; The second Merseburg Charm as found in Talking Stick No.11; Seiðr as found in Talking Stick No.10

Snorri Sturlusson - Edda

Edred Thorsson - Futhark and Runelore

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